

AUTHENTIC SUCCESS

Kathleen White 1960–2014

BY GARY INDIANA

38 **W**hen Kathleen White moved to New York in 1987 she didn't have any friends, so she painted one. That's the quick story of a picture I can legitimately call haunting: *My Friend*. Seated, or perched, on a yellowish plinth that might be an ottoman or a traveling bag, one elongated forearm resting between his legs, the other extending from a slightly flexed elbow down to brittle fingers in a long red glove, the figure appears near a corner of a carpeted room, scumbled darkness streaked with light forming one wall, a nimbus of flames, even lava, crackling behind his head and shoulder.

My Friend shows you something of how Kathleen was, what she looked for in people, and what she hoped to find in the world, and sometimes did, sometimes didn't; this friend is subtle, complicated, more than a little hidden, freakishly beautiful and singular, his visible eye circumspect, his posture expectant; I'll let you bring me into your world, and/but I am who I am. The friend appears to me a shy person in a moment of realization that another human being possibly finds him lovable, maybe for the first time ever. The artist Katie Peyton has a more freighted take: "Haunted by the image of the friend. It is because of the terror in it, though it is accompanied by the sweetness of such an unguarded expression of loneliness. The terror is the fear of living alone, the impossible fact of dying alone. It opens that hot-to-the-touch negative-zero space inside, the black-hole number that can't be brought into focus." One view doesn't negate the other. This life is a fearful, lonely, terrifying thing, even between friends. We don't always feel the space between each other as the existential chasm that it is, but it's there. Still we have a natural desire for the warmth of contact and alliance: the need to love.

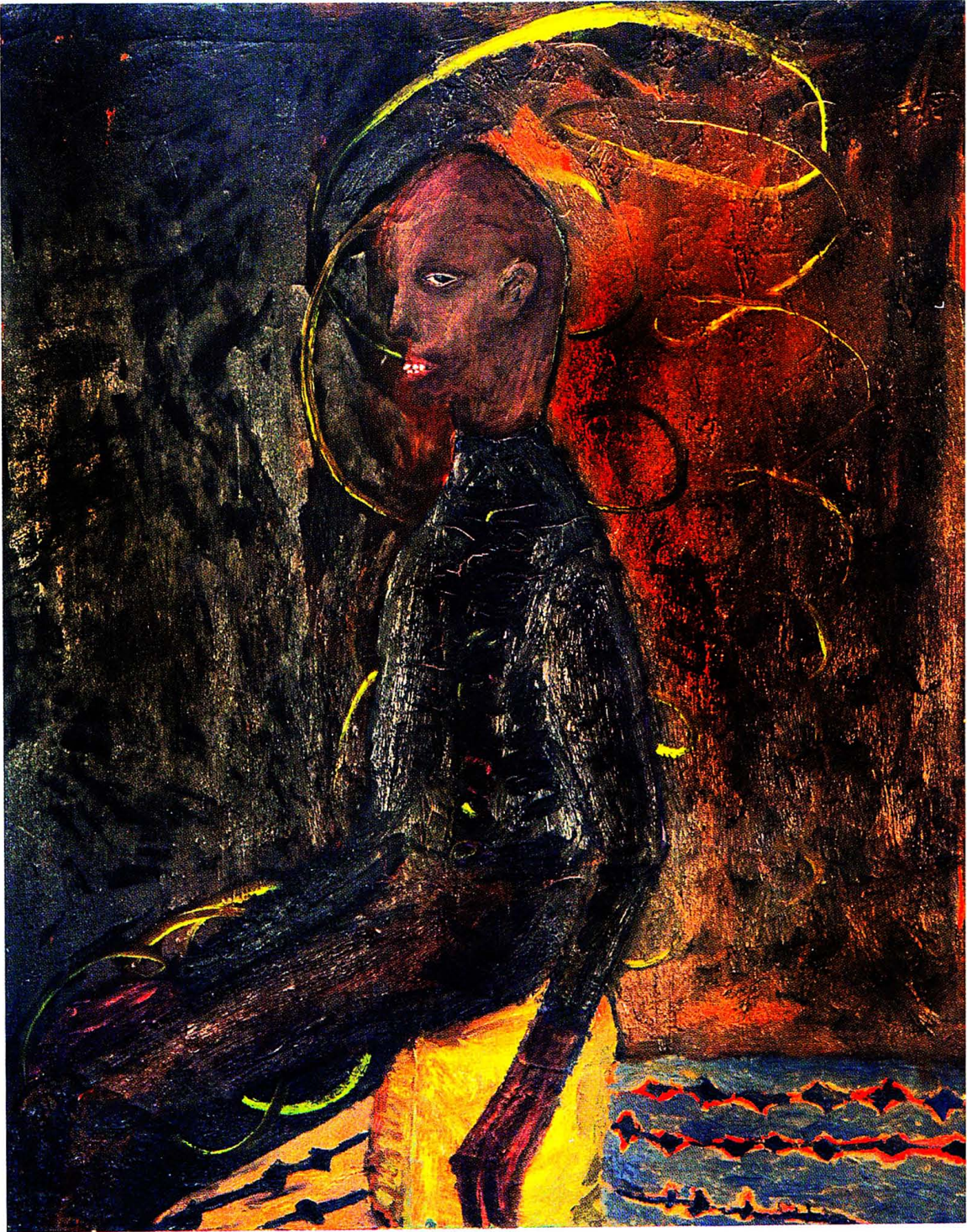
Is this friend an alien? If so, good. As an artist, as a person, Kathleen, who passed away last September, was drawn to what academic people like to call "Otherness,"

and others call out-of-the-ordinary people and things. She was attuned to the wound, and quick to appreciate the extravagant improvisations of the damaged. Her bullshit detector was faster than a bullet and scarily accurate. She loved disobedience and daring.

It isn't possible to summarize an artist's life and work in a few hundred words; I can try to evoke a sense of Kathleen's spirit, and hope that others—many others—will write more detailed, comprehensive articles about the art she produced over several decades: videos, paintings, sculptures, and sound works, remarkable for their emotional punch, aesthetic fastidiousness, wit, and concision. A great deal of her work sprang from loss and translates remembrance—of family members, of friends who died in the AIDS epidemic—into astute, depthful objects and manifestations of continuing resonance. Despite the anguished places she drew it from, her work is spiked with drollery and a sense of the absurd: I immediately think of *The Spark Between L and D* (1987), a performance in which the artist, dressed as a nurse, after socking herself repeatedly in the head, licking blood off her fingers, and wiping them off with paper towels from a medical bag, proceeds to mummify herself in surgical gauze and tape she extracts from the same bag while singing, in distracted fashion, "On Broadway." The song becomes muffled and incoherent after she gags herself with a bandage. Like Winnie in Beckett's *Happy Days*, she has a bag full of interesting, useless palliatives that ultimately reduce her to silence. It's horrifying. And funny.

Kathleen was a long-distance swimmer in an alternative or parallel art stream that has existed in New York and elsewhere throughout the current period of art corporatization, enlivening an otherwise taxidermic art world where supermarket fairs and ingenious money laundering

OPPOSITE *My Friend*, ca. 1987–9. oil on canvas, 44" x 34".





predominate. She showed work when she felt moved to; mere opportunity didn't suit her way of doing things—once, invited by Ethan Shoshan to exhibit something in “Strange Birds,” a show at the Center for Book Arts where artists displayed “objects that hold significant personal meaning to them,” Kathleen offered nothing as her contribution. “Attachment will bite you in the ass, every time,” she explained. “If you are so attached to some thing that it becomes your identity, what happens when that thing doesn't exist anymore? The best thing I have is what people have given me, and I have it inside of myself.”

Unless it excludes everything else, there's nothing wrong with being career-minded, but Kathleen simply wasn't. She saw the effect celebrity and “personal branding” often had on other artists and didn't find it appealing. Authentic success was another story: she was glad when that came someone's way. She didn't have the envy gene. It simply wasn't there.

Her activity ranged beyond the creation of physical objects, in art carried out by other means. In collaboration with her husband, Rafael Sánchez, this included a sidewalk book table they set up nearly every day for a decade on Hudson Street. “By exposing other people to our ‘precious goods,’” Kathleen said, “we're letting go of them, which gives them back to us, because it creates a dialogue that illuminates things that wouldn't necessarily have been brought to light if they'd been left on the shelves.” They produced four issues of an “environmental magazine,” *alLuPiNiT*, that featured contributors such as Hunter Reynolds, Luther Price, and TABBOO!; Kathleen was herself a formidable wordsmith, and one of the best-read people I've known.

And one of the best artists. I was late to recognize this, partly because for some years I basically knew her as a voice on the telephone—a smoky, husky voice—that lived in the same apartment as a friend who was, more often than not, somewhere other than New York; I would call trying to catch the friend and end up talking to Kathleen, sometimes for hours, about everything imaginable. And partly because, during those same years, I avoided galleries and art exhibitions, for reasons I won't go into. As it happens I had seen her work in some group shows, and been startled by it, but didn't realize this “Kathleen White” person was the same Kathleen I spent hours on the phone with. So for years we knew each other intimately well and at the same time hardly at all. On the rare occasions when I saw Kathleen out and about, I knew this stylish woman who resembled Liz Taylor's Gloria Wondrous in *Butterfield 8* (with a more adventurous fashion sense) was Kathleen-who-lives-in-Sharon's-place, but the cognitive drizzle of today's world being what it is, I never entirely put them together until a few years ago. What can I tell you? She wasn't pushy. She didn't *implore* me to see what she was up to, she wasn't *hell-bent* on reminding me she was an artist, she didn't mistake me for an art critic or herself for the kind of artist for whom every *influential person* is there to be used like a Kleenex. I got it, finally, and now that she's gone, of course, I wish I had gotten it a lot sooner. ■

The Spark Between L and D, 1987, scan from a performance flyer xerox.

Gary Indiana is a New York-based artist and writer whose work over four decades, including a new film, *YOUNG GINGER*, will be sampled at *Envoy Enterprises* in NYC in March.